

WHY DOES REPATRIATE CAREER SUCCESS VARY? AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION FROM BOTH TRADITIONAL AND PROTEAN CAREER PERSPECTIVES

Abstract

To increase the long-term benefits of global mobility for multinational corporations, international assignments and intra-organizational careers **must** be strategically integrated. However, systematic research on former expatriates' career success upon **returning** to their home organization remains scarce. Hence, this study transfers findings from the career literature to the repatriation context to identify the predictors of objective and subjective repatriate career success. Integrating traditional and protean career theory, we investigate data from 295 repatriates of publicly listed German organizations. Applying partial least squares structural equation modeling, we reveal that objective career success upon repatriation is affected by international assignment characteristics with human capital implications, repatriation support provided by the organization, and **the individual's** self-directed career management. Objective career success, organizational repatriation support, and self-directed career management further affect subjective career success in terms of career satisfaction. Hence, substantiating an impact of both traditional and protean **career** factors on repatriate careers, our results lay the ground for repatriation strategies **that** combine organizational and individual career management. In this way, multinational corporations can go beyond managing repatriate elites to make better use of all globally experienced employees.

Introduction

Global mobility in the form of international assignments (IAs) has become an integral part of the daily business of multinational corporations (MNCs). While MNCs' IA management initially focused on facilitating the stay of expatriates overseas (e.g., Tung, 1987), interest in the long-term benefits of IAs is increasing steadily (e.g., Brookfield Relocation Services, 2016; Collings, 2014). In the host country, expatriates have various opportunities to develop human capital related to international business (IB). Upon their return to the home country, this human capital can provide a source of competitive advantage to MNCs (Oddou et al., 2013), thus increasing corporate performance if former expatriates work in positions of responsibility (Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2001). The strategic integration of IAs and intra-organizational careers therefore is one of the greatest challenges currently faced by MNCs engaging in global mobility (Brookfield Relocation Services, 2016).

However, the relationship between expatriation and career success upon repatriation remains poorly managed and remarkably under-researched. Explorative work indicates that some individuals are promoted when they return to the home country, whereas others complain about career stagnation or even derailment (e.g., Aldossari & Robertson, 2016; Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009). Nevertheless, very few studies to date systematically analyze the drivers of objective (Bolino, 2007; Kraimer, Shaffer, & Bolino, 2009) and subjective (Ren, Bolino, Shaffer, & Kraimer, 2013) repatriate career success. This is critical, as repatriate career success plays a central role in the long-term benefits of IAs. It not only affects turnover intentions (Kraimer et al., 2009), thereby reflecting an MNC's ability to integrate the human capital obtained overseas, but is further likely to influence the relocation willingness of future expatriates (Bolino, 2007; Pinto, Cabral-Cardoso, & Werther, 2012). Hence, recent literature reviews highlight the need for further clarification on why

individuals' career success varies upon return from an IA (Baruch, Altman, & Tung, 2016; Breitenmoser & Bader, 2016; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen, & Bolino, 2012). Our study aims to address this need. More precisely, by transferring insights from the career literature to the context of repatriation, this work is the first to empirically demonstrate that repatriate career success can be explained by two distinct yet not contradictory career perspectives, i.e., traditional and protean career theory.

Career scholars traditionally focus on the organization's role in career success. Employees advance by adding the most value to the MNC, i.e., winning the human capital contest, and/or by receiving organizational support (see Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005, for an overview). The repatriation literature thus far has also emphasized the MNC's responsibility for effective repatriation (e.g., Aldossari & Robertson, 2016; Kraimer et al., 2009; Szkudlarek & Sumpter, 2015). However, career scholars increasingly argue that instead of simply relying on organizational practices, employees today also engage in self-directed career management to pursue their career goals (see Sullivan & Baruch, 2009, for an overview). With few exceptions (e.g., Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007), this protean career attitude is still neglected in repatriation research. Nevertheless, protean career factors may complement traditional career factors in the repatriation context, thus serving as a key competency of individuals that facilitates the strategic integration of IAs and intra-organizational careers (O'Sullivan, 2002).

Consequently, using data from 295 repatriates of publicly listed German MNCs, this study integrates traditional and protean career theory to investigate (1) the importance of IA characteristics with human capital implications for objective career success, (2) the role of repatriation support provided by the organization and self-directed career management displayed by the individual in objective and subjective career success, and (3) the interrelation

of objective and subjective career success upon return from an IA. With these considerations, our research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it applies two distinct but not contradictory career perspectives in a common framework to address an unresolved issue in repatriation research, i.e., varying career success upon return from an IA. Second, it compares the explanatory power of both theories, outlining how each is vital to explaining the career outcomes of repatriates. Third, it extends the ongoing discussion on the nature of contemporary careers to the field of repatriation. While career responsibility is increasingly shifting from the organization to the individual, the organizational career is still relevant. Hence, to make efficient use of their employees' changing career attitudes, MNCs should adopt career strategies that combine both organizational and individual career management (Clarke, 2013; De Vos & Cambré, 2016; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Our study lays the ground for respective strategies in the repatriation context.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

To examine repatriate career success from both traditional and protean career perspectives, we must first define the term “career success.” Career research commonly regards advancing up the career ladder as an indicator of intra-organizational career success (Hall, 1976). Existing empirical work on objective repatriate career success largely adapts this understanding by focusing on hierarchical progression compared to the last job overseas (Kraimer et al., 2009). Using the last expatriate job as a benchmark is appropriate, as IAs are intense, long-term experiences with considerable effects on an individual's identity and self-understanding (Kohonen, 2008). Hence, former expatriates often think of their last expatriate job – rather than their last domestic job prior to the IA – when evaluating their career outcomes upon repatriation (e.g., Aldossari & Robertson, 2016; Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009).

Shaffer and colleagues (2012) recommend considering repatriates' hierarchical progression as an indicator of objective career success; however, they also advise consulting multiple indicators. Career research argues that in addition to hierarchical position, compensation and project responsibility also reflect career status in an organization (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Ng et al., 2005). In the repatriation context, compensation development compared to the last expatriate job is not an adequate indicator of objective career success, as the salary of former expatriates during their IA largely depends on the destination to which they were assigned (Sims & Schraeder, 2005). Thus, our study analyzes the individuals' job responsibility development upon repatriation, a variable that includes changes in both hierarchical position and degree of project responsibility. We thereby take a more diversified approach to objective repatriate career success.

However, while job responsibility development provides a valid objective indicator, career success can also be defined from a subjective standpoint, i.e., in terms of employees' career satisfaction (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). In light of protean career attitudes, subjective career satisfaction must inevitably be considered when investigating career outcomes. Self-determined protean careerists ascribe more importance to psychological success than to their ranking in objective career measures (Hall, 1976, 2004). Subjective career satisfaction is thus likely to be vital to the strategic integration of former expatriates.

Ren et al. (2013) demonstrate that the objective career success of repatriates affects their subjective career satisfaction. Scholars nevertheless argue that the two career variables are conceptually distinct (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Ng et al., 2005). As depicted in Figure 1, our conceptual framework therefore differentiates between objective and subjective career success upon repatriation, while also considering their interrelation. Due to resource constraints, traditional career theory reasons that to objectively advance in an organization

employees need to acquire elite status. This can be achieved by winning the contest of the most valuable human capital and/or by being favored by established elites through organizational support (Turner, 1960). Thus, according to traditional career theory, objective repatriate career success depends on IA characteristics with human capital implications (purpose, performance, and destination) and organizational repatriation support in our model. However, protean career theory argues that employees are increasingly proactive in managing their own careers, independently of what their employer may have planned for them (Hall, 2004). Hence, objective repatriate career success also depends on self-directed career management. Eventually, integrating traditional and protean career theory, subjective repatriate career success depends on objective repatriate career success, organizational repatriation support, and self-directed career management.

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A Traditional Perspective on Objective Repatriate Career Success

Spending time working in foreign subsidiaries provides employees with various opportunities to obtain valuable human capital (Oddou et al., 2013). Research therefore often considers corporate IA experiences as a human capital investment per se (e.g., Benson & Pattie, 2008; Suutari, Brewster, Mäkelä, Dickmann, & Tornikoski, 2017). However, IA experiences are highly diverse. Consequently, their human capital implications differ. The purpose of a particular IA is therefore likely to play a vital role in this regard (Bolino, 2007; Kraimer et al., 2009).

While MNCs engage in expatriation for various reasons, IA purposes can be summarized in two overall dimensions, i.e., the degree to which MNCs intend to meet a demand in the host country and the degree to which they intend to support managerial

development (Pucik, 1992; Shay & Baack, 2004). When IAs are largely demand driven, MNCs aim to compensate for technical or managerial skill gaps in foreign subsidiaries. Hence, expatriates onsite serve primarily as a source of expertise or control (Edström & Galbraith, 1977; Shay & Baack, 2004). Individuals may have opportunities to obtain some general human capital concerning foreign markets, cultures, or languages while living and working in the host country, but from the MNC perspective, managerial development is only a secondary goal of the assignment, if it is a goal at all. Hence, the more demand driven an IA, the less likely it is that measures will be taken to intentionally facilitate learning overseas (Barry Hocking, Brown, & Harzing, 2004; Collings, 2014).

By contrast, when IAs have a high degree of developmental purpose, acquiring human capital is the primary objective rather than a by-product of the overseas experience. MNCs delegate promising talent abroad to develop future leaders who will be able to successfully steer the organization in today's challenging IB environment (Collings, 2014). Thus, in the host country, expatriates are not only encouraged to develop general human capital related to IB but also given the opportunity to obtain highly organization-specific human capital, such as international networks or an in-depth understanding of the MNC's global value chain (Barry Hocking et al., 2004). According to traditional career theory, organization-specific human capital is more valuable to MNCs than general human capital (Becker, 1993). Thus, the higher the IA's developmental purpose, the more likely repatriates are to win the intra-organizational human capital contest back in their home country. More job responsibility should be the reward (Bolino, 2007). We hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The degree of developmental purpose of the IA is positively related to the job responsibility development of repatriates.

However, even if a job affords every opportunity to obtain human capital, scholars reason that the human capital developed also ultimately depends on the job performance delivered (Judge et al., 1995). Human capital gains among repatriates should therefore differ depending on individual accomplishments in the host country (Kraimer et al., 2009).

Researchers commonly regard expatriate performance as a multidimensional construct that consists of both task and contextual performance overseas (e.g., Caligiuri, 1997; Malek & Budhwar, 2013). Task performance concerns the functional aspects of an IA, such as meeting job objectives and performance standards. Contextual performance refers to achievements outside of the functional dimension of an IA, such as interacting with coworkers or adapting to foreign customs and norms (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004). Various studies emphasize the role of expatriates' adjustment to the social, cultural, and environmental context in the host country for IA success (e.g., Caligiuri, 1997; Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007). A former expatriate who successfully supervised a product launch overseas is likely to have cultivated superior global leadership skills than someone who failed in this regard (Oddou et al., 2013). However, if he or she was moreover able to establish trust-based relationships with colleagues onsite, sustainable networks may have been established that facilitate long-term knowledge transfer across borders (Reiche, 2012). Hence, the stronger individuals' task and contextual performance during the IA, the more effective they are likely to have been in developing general and organization-specific human capital. According to traditional career theory, their opportunities for winning the human capital contest upon repatriation increase, which should be reflected in their level of job responsibility (Bolino, 2007). We hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Task performance (2a) and contextual performance (2b) during the IA is positively related to the job responsibility development of repatriates.

Human capital gains among repatriates are also likely to differ depending on where individuals were assigned during their IA (Bolino, 2007). Host countries vary decisively in their level of economic development. The onsite infrastructure of subsidiaries varies accordingly (World Economic Forum, 2014).

Developing economies have growing market potential that MNCs are just beginning to exploit. Expatriates onsite therefore regularly struggle with a lack of infrastructure, non-standardized business procedures (Harvey, Speier, & Novicevic, 1999), or even safety hazards (Bader & Berg, 2013). To succeed in this environment, individuals need to develop human capital that is highly context-specific, e.g., knowledge about local politics, customs, or cultures (Björkman, & Xiucheng, 2002; Harvey et al., 1999; Li & Scullion, 2010). Upon repatriation, this knowledge has little value in a (developed) home economy where the way of conducting business is fundamentally different (Harvey et al., 1999). While individuals returning from developing economies may also have developed superior trouble-shooting skills or higher stress resistance, traditional career theory argues that such general human capital is less valuable to MNCs than organization-specific human capital (Becker, 1993).

Expatriates in developed economies, on the contrary, have various opportunities to obtain organization-specific human capital. These countries have played an integral role in IB for some time. Thus, the onsite infrastructure is well established, which offers expatriates the chance to learn about best practices that could be valuable back home (Oddou et al., 2013). Experienced foreign colleagues help to create powerful networks that may entail continued access to respective knowledge upon repatriation (Reiche, 2012). Due to their established position within the organization's boundaries, these contacts may even be able to provide critical information regarding career opportunities in the home country (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). Thus, the more developed the host country's economy, the more likely it is that

repatriates will win the human capital contest back home, *i.e.*, receive higher job responsibility (Ng et al., 2005). We hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 3: The level of economic development of the IA destination is positively related to the job responsibility development of repatriates.

Alongside the importance of human capital, *traditional career theory* also emphasizes the role of organizational support in intra-organizational advancement (Ng et al., 2005). Current studies on objective repatriate career success support this notion. Bolino (2007) and Kraimer et al. (2009) argue that upon return from an IA, an expatriate might have promotion opportunities that vary not only depending on the human capital acquired overseas but also depending on whether individuals were provided with repatriation support by the MNC. Explorative studies further emphasize the role of repatriation support in objective repatriate career success (e.g., Aldossari & Robertson, 2016; Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009).

Organizational repatriation support can take various forms, such as mentoring, pre-departure briefings, or financial counseling (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Szkudlarek & Sumpter, 2015). For expatriates who spent considerable time away from the home organization, such support practices can ease their return. The literature frequently blames the “out of sight, out of mind syndrome” for unsuccessful repatriation. With their temporary removal from headquarters, expatriates assume the risk of falling off the organizational radar (Tung, 1988). Support practices *may* counteract this risk because they help expatriates stay connected with important contacts back home, grasp personnel and structural changes that occur while working abroad, and inform them about job openings (Bolino, 2007). *Traditional career theory indicates that* by offering organizational repatriation support, MNCs provide employees with resources that facilitate access to attractive jobs *in the home organization* (Ng

et al., 2005). The more repatriation support individuals are provided with(?), the higher their job responsibility is likely to be upon repatriation (Bolino, 2007). We hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 4: Organizational repatriation support is positively related to the job responsibility [development](#) of repatriates.

A Protean Perspective on Objective Repatriate Career Success

As demonstrated, traditional career theory targets an MNC's elites, thereby considering employees to be passive recipients of organizational good will. However, [protean career theory](#) reasons that individuals increasingly are masters of their own careers (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Individuals with a protean career attitude regard their careers as a life-long sequence of work experiences. Instead of being shaped by one organization, these experiences are shaped by personal career choices and the search for self-fulfillment (Hall, 1976, 2004).

[While the protean career attitude is found to be a main driver in contemporary careers \(Grimland, Vigoda-Gadot, & Baruch, 2012\)](#), few studies to date have considered the role of a protean career attitude in repatriation (see Breitenmoser & Bader, 2016, for an overview). The only empirical [study](#) finds that proactive career management increases the turnover intentions of former expatriates (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). However, career research argues that individuals can also display protean career attitudes while intending to remain with their current employer (Briscoe, Hall, & Frautschy DeMuth, 2006; Clarke, 2013).

Briscoe et al. (2006) differentiate [between](#) two related yet distinct dimensions of a protean career attitude: the values-driven and the self-directed career management attitudes. While the first refers to the rather intrinsic definition of career success prevalent among protean careerists, [the latter can be regarded as the translation of a protean career attitude into concrete actions \(De Vos & Soens, 2008\)](#). Studies by O'Sullivan (2002) and Cerdin and Le

Pargneux (2009) suggest that (former) expatriates who engage in self-directed career management might be able to produce superior repatriation outcomes for both themselves and the organization. More precisely, these individuals can take measures such as proactive information seeking to obtain an attractive job back in the home country, strengthen cross-cultural re-adjustment, and minimize turnover intentions (O'Sullivan, 2002). Mezias and Scandura (2005) further reason that employees with protean career attitudes may proactively seek relationships with a mentor, which can facilitate the IA process. Hence, if (former) expatriates display a protean career attitude in terms of self-directed career management, they might be able to efficiently promote their personal goals through the IA process, independently of any human capital they gain or support they receive from the MNC. Self-directed career management may also help employees remain well connected and updated on changes in the home organization and to be informed about attractive job opportunities (O'Sullivan, 2002). The likelihood of obtaining a job with high responsibility upon return should therefore increase. We hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 5: A protean career attitude in terms of self-directed career management is positively related to the job responsibility development of repatriates.

An Integrated Perspective on Subjective Repatriate Career Success

We now integrate traditional and protean career theory to clarify the predictors of subjective career satisfaction upon repatriation. While research on the modes of repatriate career success is generally scarce, more studies have been dedicated to investigating objective (Bolino, 2007; Kraimer et al., 2009) than subjective career success (Ren et al., 2013). However, objective and subjective career success are closely related. In fact, career (e.g., Judge et al., 1995) and repatriation scholars alike (Ren et al., 2013) argue that the former

affects the latter. This logic [draws on traditional career theory](#) and appears to be highly applicable to the repatriation context. Employees accepting IAs often expect this investment to increase their likelihood of winning the intra-organizational human capital contest upon returning (Doherty, Dickmann, & Mills, 2011). If this expectation is fulfilled, their career satisfaction should increase. Conversely, repatriates who feel they have not been rewarded for their perceived hard work overseas may be unsatisfied (Ren et al., 2013). Several qualitative studies describe the disappointment that repatriates express if their intra-organizational career stagnates or derails relative to the time spent overseas (e.g., Bossard & Peterson, 2005; Suutari & Brewster, 2003). As Haslberger and Brewster (2009) explain, at the repatriation stage, most employees expect their employer to deliver the benefits that they perceive they have earned from an IA, and meeting or failing to meet this expectation is likely to provoke strong reactions. We hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 6: Job responsibility [development](#) is positively related to the career satisfaction of repatriates.

[Traditional career](#) research also demonstrates that subjective career success is affected by the level of [support](#) provided by the employing organization (e.g., Ng et al., 2005; Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999). This finding is again likely to be transferable to the repatriation context. Explorative studies suggest that a lack of repatriation support not only leads to uncertainty with regard to the repatriation process in general but also entails the risk of high levels of frustration, as individuals feel unappreciated for their efforts overseas (e.g., Aldossari & Robertson, 2016; Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009). When employees return from a challenging IA, they feel that they have contributed to the MNC in a way that should be valued (Haslberger & Brewster, 2009). Organizational repatriation support is likely to be

considered a form of appreciation. Repatriates who receive(d) this support might thus experience higher career satisfaction. We hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 7: Organizational repatriation support is positively related to the career satisfaction of repatriates.

Finally, protean career theory suggests that career satisfaction also varies depending on whether employees engage in self-directed career management (Grimland et al., 2012). Cerdin and Le Pargneux (2009) propose that a protean career attitude can lead to greater career satisfaction throughout the IA process as well, as employees then proactively navigate their career based on personal priorities. This relationship was supported for expatriates still on assignment (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2014). If (former) expatriates assume responsibility for their future by displaying a protean career attitude in terms of self-directed career management, the repatriation process is likely to proceed in a way that better suits their expectations (O'Sullivan, 2002). Additionally, this attitude may give employees a sense of control over what happens to them. Thus, they are less likely to perceive that they are entirely at the MNC's mercy. Even if objective career success upon repatriation does not take the desired course, these people might feel less frustrated than those who are not self-directed managers of their careers. In other words, repatriates who display self-directed career management might perceive that they have given their best effort, which may result in greater career satisfaction. We hypothesize as follows:

Hypothesis 8: A protean career attitude in terms of self-directed career management is positively related to the career satisfaction of repatriates.

Method

Procedure and Sample

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an empirical [survey](#) among repatriates still employed by their assigning MNC. To ensure comparable results, all repatriates [were corporate expatriates \(as opposed to self-initiated expatriates\)](#) who had returned within 48 months prior to data collection, a timeframe in line with previous studies (e.g., Benson & Pattie, 2008; Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009).

We focused on repatriates employed by publicly listed German MNCs. Germany is the largest economy in Europe and the world's third largest export country (World Trade Organization, 2015). Due to the respective scale and complexity of German MNCs' international activities, IAs play a vital role, and their management is rather sophisticated.

[We identified repatriates conforming to our selection criteria during an extensive selection process involving screening profiles in professional social networks and manually researching respective email addresses. Moreover, through the help of human resource managers, several additional candidates were identified.](#) Repatriates [were then](#) contacted by email along with an invitation to participate in our anonymous online survey. 1,127 repatriates were invited, and 295 usable datasets were obtained. While the response rate of 26% is slightly below average for repatriation research (e.g., Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007), career issues are a sensitive topic, which may accordingly [have impacted](#) data collection. Nevertheless, our respondents' demographic characteristics are comparable to previous work in the field (e.g., Kraimer et al., 2009; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). The average respondent is 40 years old and holds a Master's degree. Of the respondents, 82% are male, underscoring that women are still underrepresented in

expatriation (Brookfield Relocation Services, 2016). Respondents completed 1.7 IAs, on average. In our questionnaire, [they](#) were instructed to consider only their most recent IA with their current employer in their responses. The average length of the last IA was 33 months, with a majority of respondents assigned to China (27%), the US (17%), and India (6%).

Measures

To measure the variables of interest, we used standard scales from the existing literature when available. If not stated otherwise, the respondents were asked to indicate their answers on a five-point Likert scale. [An overview of the measurement scales and reliability estimates of all latent constructs included in the model is provided in Table A and Table B in the Appendix.](#)

Subjective career satisfaction was measured [using](#) four items adapted [from a well-established scale](#) by Greenhaus et al. (1990).

Job responsibility [development](#) was operationalized based on a scale by Kraimer et al. (2009). Similar to [them](#), we opted to compare the respondents' objective career state upon repatriation with that during expatriation. However, as Kraimer et al. (2009) focused only on repatriates' hierarchical position, [we followed suggestions by Shaffer et al. \(2012\) and](#) extended this scale with another item that further considers changes in project responsibility.

Protean career attitude in terms of self-directed career management was [measured using](#) four items from the "self-directed career management attitude" scale by Briscoe et al. (2006).

Organizational repatriation support was measured based on a list of 11 support practices adapted from Lazarova and Caligiuri (2001). Support practices [include](#) "mentoring programs while on assignment" and "pre-departure briefings on what to expect during repatriation," [for instance](#). Respondents were asked to indicate which support practices were made available to them before or after their return from the IA and which were not. Following Lazarova

and Caligiuri (2001) and Lazarova and Cerdin (2007), a support practice was assigned a score of 1 if available and 0 if not available. Individual scores were summarized to build an overall organizational repatriation support availability score.

The level of economic development of the IA destination was determined by asking the respondents to name the country of their last assignment. The country was given a score based on the business sophistication index by the World Economic Forum (2014). Scores rank from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest) and consider the level of sophistication of a country's overall business networks and of its individual organizations' business and operations.

Performance during the IA was measured based on a scale by Kraimer and Wayne (2004) that differentiates task and contextual performance in the host country. We thereby followed the example of similar studies in the field (e.g., van der Heijden, van Engen, & Paauwe, 2009; Wu & Ang, 2011). The task performance scale consisted of three items and the contextual performance scale consisted of four items. Black and Porter (1991) suggest that when self-reported performance measures are used, respondents should be encouraged to recall their most recent performance evaluation. Thus, we asked the respondents to rely on their last performance evaluation as an expatriate when rating their performance from (1) very poor to (5) outstanding.

The IA's degree of developmental purpose was measured using a two-item scale by Shay and Baack (2004). As the original scale is tailored to the hotel industry, we adapted the wording to the general business environment.

We addressed the issue of common method variance (CMV) in multiple ways. First, to address CMV ex ante, we ensured that the questionnaire design was consistent with relevant recommendations. We separated measures of dependent and independent variables and used different data collection formats when possible. We also assured the respondents of the

complete anonymity of their responses and complemented the information obtained with data from an objective source to measure one of our independent variables (level of economic development) (Chang, van Witteloostuijn, & Eden, 2010; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Second, to control for CMV ex post, we conducted the Harman single-factor test using SPSS. The single factor explained 23% of the total variance and thus lies below the threshold of 50%. We further performed a common latent factor (CLF) analysis. Using SPSS AMOS, we double-loaded all latent construct items applied in the questionnaire on their construct and an unmeasured CLF (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The model fit showed marginal improvement from introducing the CLF (without CLF: $\chi^2/df=1.15$, CFI=.99, RMSEA=.02; with CLF: $\chi^2/df=.97$, CFI=1.00, RMSEA=.00). All factor loadings remained significant. Hence, the measures taken indicate that CMV is not an issue in our dataset.

Analysis and Results

To test our hypotheses, we applied partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). [Routinely applied in marketing research \(Hair, Sarstedt, Ringle, & Mena, 2012b\)](#), PLS-SEM is increasingly used by scholars in the fields of human resource management (Becker, Klein, & Wetzels, 2012), IB (Richter, Sinkovics, Ringle, & Schlägel, 2016), and strategic management (Hair, Sarstedt, Pieper, & Ringle, 2012a). While this has sparked a lively discussion in the literature on the advantages and disadvantages of using PLS-SEM (e.g., Henseler et al., 2014; Rönkkö & Evermann, 2013), even critical scholars acknowledge the method's usefulness in more explorative studies (McIntosh, Edwards, & Antonakis, 2014). PLS-SEM is a powerful approach for explaining variance in endogenous variables that have been scarcely [analyzed](#) (Reinartz, Haenlein, & Henseler, 2009), [as is the case with repatriate career success in our work](#). We investigated a

complex and focused model in line with the prediction goal of PLS-SEM (Hair, Sarstedt et al., 2012b). PLS-SEM is also appropriate for uncovering new causal relationships (Richter et al., 2016), such as the role of self-directed career management in repatriate career success.

With $n=295$ and nine structural paths, our sample satisfies the “ten-times rule” suggested by Barclay, Higgins, and Thompson (1995) for substantial analysis based on PLS-SEM. As research advises against applying a global goodness-of-fit index for PLS-SEM (Henseler & Sarstedt, 2013), we followed a two-stage approach to assess the quality of our model, first evaluating the outer model and then proceeding with the inner model (Hair et al., 2012a). Calculations were performed using the software SmartPLS 3.0 and setting the maximum number of iterations to 300 (Ringle et al., 2015). For all procedures involving bootstrapping, we followed conservative suggestions in the literature, applying no sign changes and consulting 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hair et al., 2012a). Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the means and standard deviations for the exogenous and endogenous variables, and Figure 1 depicts the inner model.

--- Insert Table 1 and Table 2 about here ---

Assessment of the Outer Model

The latent variables in our model were measured reflectively. However, as noted previously, organizational repatriation support and the level of economic development of the IA destination were indicated by overall scores and were thus excluded from this discussion of construct reliability and validity.

In our study, the outer model met all standards proposed in the literature. Internal consistency was confirmed, as all composite reliability values were well above the threshold of .70 (values were between .86 and .93) (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Convergent validity was

assured, as we only retained statistically significant indicators with loadings higher than .70. It is common in practice to find indicator loadings below this threshold (Hulland, 1999). In these cases, we followed recommendations in the literature and removed indicators with loadings lower than .40 as well as indicators with loadings between .40 and .70 whose removal increased the average variance extracted (AVE) (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). Subsequently, we yielded AVE values higher than .50 (values were between .61 and .84) for all variables, which supported the assumption of convergent validity (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Discriminant validity was assured by examining the cross-loadings of all indicators. Each indicator loaded highest on the construct that it was intended to measure (Chin, 1998). However, to confirm discriminant validity, we used the Fornell-Larcker criterion. As depicted in Table 3, the square root of the AVE of each construct was higher than its correlation with any other variable, thus meeting the standards for this criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).
--- Insert Table 3 about here ---

Assessment of the Inner Model

To assess the inner model, we first checked for issues of multi-collinearity. Our analysis yielded inner variance inflation factors (VIFs) of 1.38 or lower, clearly below the recommended threshold of 5 (Hair et al., 2011). We subsequently consulted the primary criterion to evaluate inner model quality, i.e., the coefficient of determination (R^2 value) of the endogenous variables. Based on our analysis, career satisfaction yielded an R^2 value of .38, and job responsibility yielded a value of .24. While these results initially appear average to weak (Chin, 1998), they are well in line with those of related studies in the field (e.g., Kraimer et al., 2009; Ren et al., 2013). Objective and subjective career success are, of course, explained by many other predictors not included in our model. However, we further applied

the blindfolding procedure (omission distance=7) to examine Stone-Geisser's Q^2 value. All variables yielded results distinctly greater than 0, thus supporting the assumption of predictive relevance (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974).

We next turned to the path coefficients and their p-values, as depicted in Figure 2, to evaluate the hypothesized relationships. We first considered the traditional perspective on objective repatriate career success. Repatriates returning from an IA with a higher degree of developmental purpose reported significantly higher job responsibility *development* ($\beta=.25$; $p<.001$). Hypothesis 1 was thus supported. However, neither better task performance ($\beta=-.14$, n.s.) nor contextual performance during the IA ($\beta=.07$, n.s.) significantly contributed to objective *repatriate* career success. Hence, Hypotheses 2a and 2b *were rejected*. Hypotheses 3 and 4 were supported, as the data revealed significant positive effects of both the level of economic development of the IA destination ($\beta=.14$; $p<.05$) and organizational repatriation support ($\beta=.18$; $p<.01$) on the job responsibility *development* of repatriates.

Turning to the protean perspective on objective repatriate career success, as predicted, self-directed career management enhanced job responsibility *development* upon returning home ($\beta=.24$; $p<.001$). Hence, our study found support for Hypothesis 5.

Considering the integrated perspective on subjective repatriate career success, the positive impact of the repatriates' job responsibility *development* on their career satisfaction was verified ($\beta=.36$; $p<.001$), supporting Hypothesis 6.¹ Organizational repatriation support ($\beta=.26$; $p<.001$) and self-directed career management ($\beta=.29$; $p<.001$) also significantly contributed to former expatriates' career satisfaction, thus supporting Hypotheses 7 and 8.

Finally, to compare the predictive relevance of the single exogenous variables, we considered the effect size f^2 . This value indicates the change in the R^2 value when a specific exogenous variable is deleted, with f^2 values of .02, .15, and .35, respectively, representing

small, medium, and large effects on the endogenous variable (Cohen, 1988). As Table 4 illustrates, the degree of developmental purpose of the IA and the level of self-directed career management demonstrated by the individual explain the greatest share of variance in job responsibility [development](#) upon repatriation ($f^2=.07$ in each case); job responsibility [development](#) upon repatriation in turn explains the greatest share of variance in individuals' career satisfaction ($f^2=.18$). As the yielded f^2 values correlate with the respective R^2 values in our study, the results again initially appear weak to average; however, as noted previously, these values are consistent with related research in the field (e.g., Kraimer et al., 2009).

--- Insert Figure 2 and Table 4 about here ---

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate varying degrees of career success upon return from an IA from a traditional as well as from a protean career perspective. We found support for both theoretical approaches, laying the ground for more diversified repatriation strategies.

As predicted by traditional career theory, objective repatriate career success in our sample was affected by IA characteristics with human capital implications (Bolino, 2007). More precisely, the job responsibility [development](#) of individuals was significantly higher when the developmental purpose of the IA and the development level of the economy from which they returned were higher. These results follow our previous argumentation that repatriates need to win the human capital contest to be rewarded with superior objective career outcomes (Becker, 1993). It is notable that the level of developmental purpose explains the most variance in repatriate job responsibility [development](#) ($f^2=.07$). Supporting the findings of Kraimer et al. (2009), our results emphasize the importance of the IA's developmental purpose as a major predictor of the [human capital](#) to be gained overseas.

In line with this notion, individual accomplishments in the host country should also be reflected in the repatriates' job responsibility development. It was thus surprising to observe that neither task nor contextual performance significantly affected the objective career success of repatriates in our study. This finding contradicts traditional career theory (Becker, 1993). Individuals who performed well in the host country were expected to have developed more valuable human capital than others (Bolino, 2007). While our results appear rather counter-intuitive, in their empirical study of US repatriates, Kraimer et al. (2009) were also unable to verify a significant link between the successful completion of IA objectives and promotion back in the home country. A possible explanation may be offered by research suggesting that the implementation of integrated performance management systems is impeded in practice, as quantifiable measures of expatriate performance are hard to define. This is particularly true for IAs with a high degree of developmental purpose (Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2008; Suutari & Tahvainen, 2002). In line with this, several human resource managers whom we interviewed after our survey noted that, for the most part, their MNCs lack integrated performance management systems. Human resource managers and superiors in the home organization may thus be unaware of their employees' accomplishments overseas. Even when records are available, existing studies reason that they may be misunderstood, as appraisal criteria often differ across countries and cultures (Collings et al., 2007; Dowling et al., 2008). Consequently, upon repatriation, performance ratings cannot be consulted as indicators of human capital achievements. This deficiency in strategic repatriation management must be addressed. Globally experienced employees in general are valuable to MNCs (Oddou et al., 2013); however, those who demonstrated strong IA performance despite all challenges encountered overseas are likely to become the next generation of global leaders. These employees are indispensable to organizations confronting IB complexity (Mendenhall,

Reiche, Bird, & Osland, 2012); therefore, all available resources must be dedicated to their identification and to their efficient integration back in the home country.

In line with traditional career theory, organizational repatriation support significantly contributed to repatriate objective career success in our study. As reasoned earlier, [support practices](#) provide (former) expatriates with resources that facilitate access to more attractive jobs upon return from an IA (Ng et al., 2005); such resources prevent [them](#) from falling off the organizational radar while abroad (Tung, 1988). However, it is interesting that a protean career attitude in terms of self-directed career management [had an even greater effect on the job responsibility development](#) of repatriates ($f^2=.04$ for organizational repatriation support; $f^2=.07$ for self-directed career management). As predicted by protean career theory, employees can also self-promote their career goals during the IA process (O'Sullivan, 2002). In our sample, this approach was even more successful than the provision of resources by the MNC. Employees may be more aware of their strengths and weaknesses than their employers are, which would mean that self-directed career management is more efficient in advancing careers than the “less customized” organizational repatriation support.

This explanatory approach receives further support from our results for the subjective career success of repatriates. As with objective career success, both traditional and protean career theory served as valid approaches for explaining career satisfaction in our study: job responsibility [development](#), organizational repatriation support, and self-directed career management all exerted significant and positive effects on subjective career success. However, while job responsibility [development](#) was clearly the strongest predictor of individual career satisfaction ($f^2=.18$), self-directed career management again explained distinctly more variance in the dependent variable than organizational repatriation support did ($f^2=.10$ for organizational repatriation support; $f^2=.13$ for self-directed career management).

This finding supports the argumentation of Cerdin and Le Pargneux (2009), who reason that protean careerists are able to navigate their career based on their individual priorities and thus achieve better results than their employers can. The resulting career outcomes are more congruent with their career expectations, thus leading to higher career satisfaction.

Theoretical Contribution

Systematically transferring insights from career research to the field of repatriation, our study makes several contributions to advance the theoretical understanding of varying career success among former expatriates, thereby helping to improve the strategic integration of IAs and intra-organizational careers. First, [corporate](#) IA experiences have often been considered a human capital investment per se (e.g., Benson & Pattie, 2008; [Suutari et al., 2017](#)). However, while our findings support the applicability of traditional career theory to explaining career outcomes upon repatriation, they emphasize the need to differentiate among IA characteristics when analyzing an IA's human capital implications for objective career success. The results stress that the framework conditions that employees experience overseas are substantially reflected in the [human capital](#) that they can develop there and, thus, in the value of that human capital to the MNC. The study further provides long-needed empirical support for the frequently discussed role of organizational support in objective and subjective repatriate career success (e.g., Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009; Kraimer et al., 2009; Szkudlarek & Sumpter, 2015). Hence, this work both supports and extends prior research on repatriate career success that adopts a traditional career perspective (e.g., Bolino, 2007; Kraimer et al., 2009; Ren et al., 2013), outlining the need to distinguish among IA experiences when investigating career-related repatriation outcomes. [It thereby also is the first study to](#)

systematically analyze objective and subjective career success upon return to the home organization in a common model.

Second, our data bolster the emerging notion that the repatriation process is determined not only by the MNC but also by employees' proactive pursuit of their career goals (e.g., Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007). Scholars investigating corporate IAs have long focused on the organization's role in repatriation (e.g., Bossard & Peterson, 2005). Protean career attitudes were primarily considered in the self-initiated expatriation literature (Doherty, 2013). However, our work suggests that a protean career attitude in terms of self-directed career management is not only relevant for corporate expatriates but is in fact a main driver of repatriate career success. We thereby translate findings from domestic career research to the repatriation context (Grimland et al., 2012). Moreover, we advance current work on the still under-researched role of a protean career attitude in repatriation (e.g., O'Sullivan, 2002), as we are the first to empirically demonstrate that it can produce superior outcomes for both individuals and MNCs. A protean career attitude in terms of self-directed career management can facilitate the strategic integration of IAs and intra-organizational careers; thus, it can constitute a key competency of individuals that is highly desirable to organizations.

Third, most importantly, our research emphasizes that in regard to repatriate career success, applying either traditional or protean career theory falls short. Both perspectives provide valid approaches to predicting objective and subjective career success upon return from an IA. This finding again extends a discussion in the career literature to the field of repatriation. Career responsibility is increasingly shifting from the organization to the individual. However, in contrast to original predictions (Hall, 1996), the organizational career did not disappear in consequence of this development. It is still relevant but currently shaped by both traditional and protean career factors (Clarke, 2013; De Vos & Cambré, 2016). In

other words, the protean and the traditional career orientation are not necessarily in opposition (Baruch, 2014). Research should therefore refrain from shifting from one theoretical extreme to another. Rather, integrative approaches are required that investigate the combined effect of organizational and individual career management (e.g., De Vos & Cambré, 2016). Our study provides such an approach in the repatriation context. It thereby is the first to emphasize that, at the end of the IA process, changing career attitudes are not only a challenge for MNCs (Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007) but can also be beneficial if channeled in line with the organization's interests. Hence, our work lays the ground for repatriation strategies that complement organizational resources with individual resources, which may allow MNCs to go beyond managing repatriate elites to make better use of all globally experienced employees.

Implications for Practice

IAs have now long been an important measure for MNCs in terms of managing their complex business activities across the globe (Shaffer et al., 2012). However, with this study, we call on organizations to improve the strategic integration of IAs and intra-organizational careers, as the human capital gained overseas can serve as a vital source of competitive advantage over the long-term (Oddou et al., 2013). In this regard, first, our findings derived from traditional career theory show that MNCs should further refine their traditional repatriation management. The current study highlights that the human capital implications of IA experiences vary based on their distinct characteristics. While MNCs appear to acknowledge this fact in regard to an IA's purpose and destination, they do not appear to have thoroughly considered individual performance overseas. However, integrated performance tracking throughout the IA process is vital not only for identifying the next generation of global leaders; decreasing performance is an alarm signal indicating difficulties that could endanger an IA's overall purpose.

MNCs should also extend their organizational repatriation support. (Former) expatriates routinely report that they lack organizational support upon return from an IA (e.g., Aldossari & Robertson, 2016; Jassawalla & Sashittal, 2009). However, our study highlights the crucial role of organizational repatriation support for both objective and subjective career success back home. In this regard, as organizational resources are constrained, MNCs may want to more strongly consider the range of support practices we investigated in this study (Lazarova & Caligiuri, 2001) to adapt their measures depending on the strategic value of the human capital that individuals can be expected to bring home. Resource-intensive support practices such as career planning sessions should be restricted to key personnel, whereas measures requiring few resources, e.g., regular communication with the home office, should be made available to every expatriate assigned to a foreign country.

Second, to go beyond managing repatriate elites, MNCs should also acknowledge our findings derived from protean career theory, as they indicate that the repatriation process is shaped by individual actions as well. Self-directed career management should be considered a key competency among employees that can complement traditional management practices and thus facilitate the strategic integration of IAs and intra-organizational careers. Thus, MNCs should systematically identify the career attitudes of their future expatriates to then encourage those with a protean career attitude to assume responsibility for their careers during the IA. For instance, at the beginning of the IA process, MNCs could call on future expatriates with a protean career attitude to find mentors instead of assigning someone to them. Thus, employees are likely to feel recognized while still having the autonomy to shape their career path by finding a mentor who suits their expectations. Hence, MNCs save the resources needed to find a matching mentor for these individuals while their career success upon

repatriation is likely to be higher. The resources saved could then be reallocated, thereby eventually leading to an improved integration of all globally experienced employees.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Several limitations must be taken into account when considering our findings. First, like most repatriation research (e.g., Kraimer et al., 2009; Ren et al., 2013), our work primarily relies on cross-sectional data. All hypotheses are based on a thorough examination of theory and existing research, which means that the arguments presented represent the most logical explanation for the observed correlations. Nevertheless, future work should conduct longitudinal studies addressing multiple sources, such as expatriates/repatriates and superiors. In addition to comparing career success during expatriation to that during repatriation, such an approach might allow further consideration of the time prior to the IA. [In addition](#), access to archival data could be provided. The use of self-reported performance and career data is common practice in the literature, as previous work supports a high correlation with objective information (e.g., Benson & Pattie, 2008; May, Korczynski, & Frenkel, 2002). Still, the risk of self-response bias could be eliminated completely by consulting archival data instead.

Second, while our sample size is comparably large (see Kraimer et al., 2009; Lazarova & Cerdin, 2007, for a comparison), it still represents a rather narrow demographic perspective. More precisely, the share of female repatriates is rather small at 18%. Although we are well in line with related work in this respect, including more women in future investigations on the topic would be a valuable research avenue. Qualitative studies suggest that repatriation may be more difficult for females than for males (Linehan & Scullion, 2002). Female traits may make it more difficult for women to stay in touch with the home organization while overseas or to build social capital onsite that can benefit their careers upon

return. A protean career attitude may even take completely different forms in women and men (Segers, Inceoglu, Vloeberghs, Bartram, & Henderickx, 2008). However, with less than one in five respondents being female, we cannot draw reliable conclusions on the role of gender. Scholars should thus dedicate more attention to potential gender differences in the future.

In the same vein, our study targets only repatriates of German MNCs. We thereby extend existing insights to repatriate career success primarily based on US samples (Benson & Pattie, 2008; Kraimer et al., 2009; Ren et al., 2013), and we keep the cultural characteristics of the assigning country constant. Nevertheless, we also contribute to the prevailing Western perspective in the repatriation literature. Western countries are characterized by a high level of economic development. IA experiences may be of relatively higher value for MNCs from less developed economies, as they may help to overcome latecomer disadvantages (Chang, Mellahi, & Wilkinson, 2009). Differences in the career implications for repatriates returning to such countries must therefore be examined.

Finally, our study focuses on repatriates who still work for their assigning MNC. This approach enabled us to respond to the call to clarify the varying levels of intra-organizational career success upon return from an IA (Shaffer et al., 2012). However, self-directed career management might assume different forms in the case of employees who have already left their assigning MNC. More precisely, this career management approach is likely to have been complemented with a boundaryless career attitude (Kuron, Schweitzer, Lyons, & Ng, 2016). For MNCs to best exploit their employees' self-directed career management, repatriation research should continue to explore this competency along with its various implications in the future. We thus advise scholars to consider repatriates who already work for another MNC; such an approach could combine our findings with those of Lazarova and Cerdin (2007) to further investigate the role of self-directed career management in repatriation.

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Figures

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

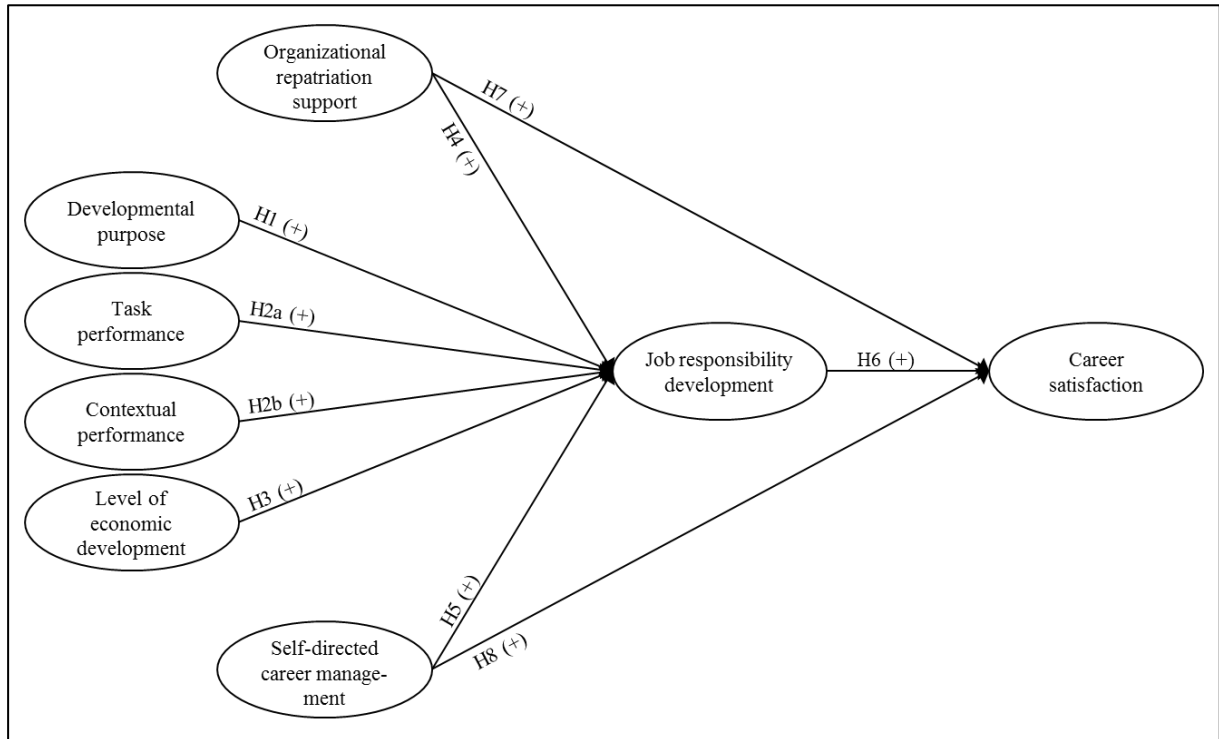
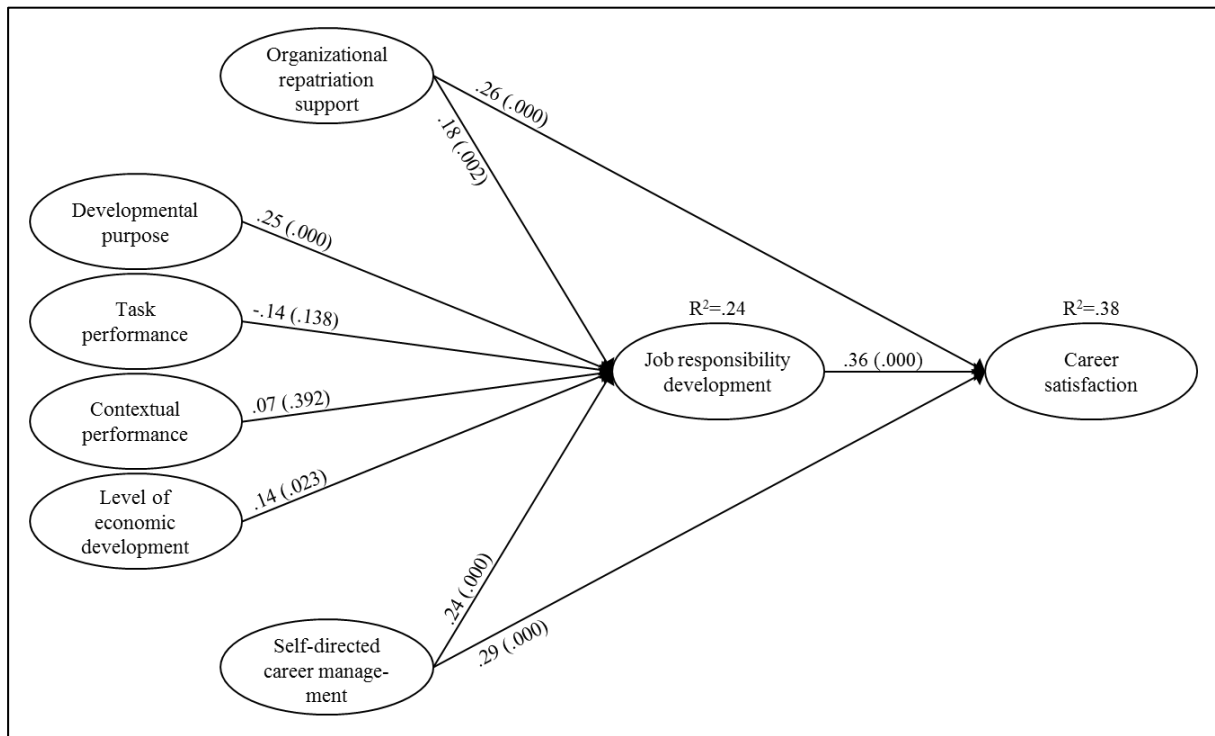


Figure 2. PLS Model (standardized path coefficients and p-values)



Tables

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Exogenous Variables

	Mean	Standard deviation
Developmental purpose	2.82	1.06
Task performance	4.23	.54
Contextual performance	4.01	.62
Level of economic development	4.76	.66
Organizational repatriation support	5.43	2.29
Self-directed career management	3.89	.68

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Endogenous Variables

	Mean	Standard deviation
Job responsibility development	3.26	1.16
Career satisfaction	3.46	.92

Table 3. Correlations and Discriminant Validity

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Career satisfaction	.87							
Job responsibility development	.50	.92						
Self-directed career management	.38	.23	.78					
Organizational repatriation support	.37	.28	.03	1.0				
Level of economic development	.02	.21	.07	.05	1.0			
Contextual performance	.05	.12	.19	.10	.13	.78		
Task performance	.08	-.05	.25	-.01	.04	.49	.85	
Developmental purpose	.26	.34	-.01	.34	.16	.14	.00	.89

The bold diagonal figures in this matrix show the square root of the AVE of each construct.

Table 4. Effect Size f^2

	f^2
Developmental purpose > job responsibility development	.07
Task performance > job responsibility development	.02
Contextual performance > job responsibility development	.00
Level of economic development > job responsibility development	.03
Organizational repatriation support > job responsibility development	.04
Self-directed career management > job responsibility development	.07
Job responsibility development > career satisfaction	.18
Organizational repatriation support > career satisfaction	.10
Self-directed career management > career satisfaction	.13

Endnote

¹ To exclude the possibility that the path relationship from subjective to objective career success is preferable to our hypothesized path relationship from objective to subjective career success, we conducted a robustness check using SPSS. We consulted the Somers-d (Somers, 1962), which yielded results supporting our assumption that repatriates' job responsibility [development](#) affects their career satisfaction rather than the reverse.

Appendix

Table A. Measurement Scales and Reliability Estimates of Latent Exogenous Variables

Variables and indicators	Loading	Cronbach's α
<i>Developmental purpose</i>		.75
I was assigned to the overseas unit to gain international experience.	.89	
A key objective that the company had for my assignment was for me to learn from the local nationals.	.90	
<i>Task performance</i>		.82
Meeting job objectives	.88	
Overall job performance	.94	
Meeting specific job responsibilities	.71	
<i>Contextual performance</i>		.79
Interacting with host country coworkers	.82	
Establishing relationships with key host-country business contacts	.83	
Adapting to foreign facility's business customs and norms	.72	
Interacting with other co-workers	.76	
<i>Self-directed career management</i>		.79
I am responsible for my success or failure in my career.	.85	
Overall, I have a very independent, self-directed career.	.75	
I am in charge of my own career.	.78	
Ultimately, I depend upon myself to move my career forward.	.74	

The respondents were asked to indicate their answers on a five-point Likert scale. When indicating their answers on task and contextual performance, respondents could further check "not applicable to my expatriate job."

Table B. Measurement Scales and Reliability Estimates of Latent Endogenous Variables

Variables and indicators	Loading	Cronbach's α
<i>Job responsibility development</i>		.82
Compared to your position during your last expatriate job, is your current position a (1) demotion... (5) promotion?	.93	
Compared to your project responsibility during your last expatriate job, are the projects you are currently responsible for a (1) decrease of responsibility... (5) increase of responsibility?	.90	
<i>Career satisfaction</i>		.90
I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career.	.88	
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals.	.92	
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for income.	.75	
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for advancement.	.92	
The respondents were asked to indicate their answers on a five-point Likert scale.		